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ABSTRACT

In a discussion of the practicum experience for student teachers, it is noted that while the experience of 50 days of teaching practice has a powerful impact on student teachers, its potential learning value is not realized. There is little opportunity for student teachers to experience the more extended role that teachers are expected to develop. Teachers have been expected to be involved in school governance, the development of school policies in curriculum, and providing broad curriculum experiences (e.g., integrating disabled students and extra-school experiences). The challenge in this study was to make the practicum more of a school experience than a classroom experience and provide opportunities for prospective teachers to experience teaching as a collaborative activity. This paper outlines the way in which the practicum experience has been revised in three cooperating schools, as the result of a joint activity between faculty and schools. A school experience has ensued which has radically altered the teacher education program for a group of student teachers and has led to a reconsideration of the relationship between tertiary institution and cooperating school in preparing teachers. Attached is an extract from an interview with two student teachers, who discuss their 12-week school experience with an external evaluator. (JD)

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CONSTRUCTING THE PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

From a constructivist perspective learning about teaching will be greatly influenced by the extensive experience student teachers bring from their formal school background. The preservice period provides an opportunity to present a further range of experiences which together with discussion and reflection has formed the basis for one teacher education program (See Table 1). The practicum component of the teacher education program initially proved less amenable to intervention than the institutional based components. There was a recognition that the school experience of 50 days teaching practice had a very powerful impact on student teachers yet there was a feeling that its potential learning value was not being realised. Several reservations were related to the fact that the practicum could generally be described as a classroom-coping experience with very little opportunity for student teachers to experience the more extended role that teachers are expected to develop. In recent years teachers have been expected to be involved in school governance (as members of school council), the development of school policies in curriculum and providing broad curriculum experiences (eg integrating disabled students, extra-school experiences, etc.). Teaching has tended to become a more collaborative activity, an aspiration also held for the teacher education program (see Table 1) and for much of our inservice work with teachers (Baird and Mitchell, 1986). The challenge was to make the practicum more of a school experience than a classroom experience and provide opportunities for intending teachers to experience teaching as a collaborative activity. Similar ideas were expressed by practising teachers and the practicum became an area of the teacher education program which required attention. This followed several years where there had been development of activities in the institutional based components of the teacher education program.

Table 1. **Propositions which have been used to guide development of the preservice program (Gunstone and Northfield 1987)**

Proposition 1. The prospective teacher has needs which must be considered in planning and implementing the program. The nature and intensity of these needs will shift during the preservice program.

Proposition 2. The transition from learner to teacher is a fundamental perspective and difficult to achieve. It is greatly facilitated by having intending teachers work closely with their colleagues.

Proposition 3. The student teacher is a learner who is actively constructing views of teaching and learning which are based on personal experience and strongly shaped by perceptions held before entering the program.

Proposition 4. The program should model the teaching/learning approaches being advocated.

Proposition 5. Student teachers should see the preservice program as a worthwhile educational experience but by definition it is only the first stage in a career which requires continual professional development.

This paper outlines the way in which the practicum experience has been revised in three cooperating schools. This revision has been a joint activity between faculty and schools. The result has been a school experience which has radically altered the teacher education program for a group of student teachers and led to a reconsideration of the relationships between tertiary institution and cooperating school in preparing teachers.

Applying constructivist principles to the practical experience

The propositions outlined in Table 1 were applied to form a school experience for student teachers with the following characteristics.

* The practicum is a 10-12 week school experience for a group of student teachers in each school. The experience takes place in the first half of the one year program after 6 weeks of orientation and activities designed to prepare students for their classroom demands. With isolated exceptions student teachers are required to be full time at the school so that the school experience forms the basis for the preservice development rather than the component where ideas are applied and basic competence is established.
* Each student teacher is allocated to two supervising teachers - a requirement for subsequent registration. In addition the total staff of each school have accepted a wider responsibility for providing experience opportunities for the student teachers.
* The formal observation and teaching commitments are the same[1] as expected of student teachers on 3 week teaching rounds. This is to allow time and so encourage participation in a wide range of school activities and collaborative work with other teachers and student teachers.

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1. Normally, student teachers are expected to teach an average of two 50-60 minute lessons per day. On a 15 day teaching round there is an expectation that student teachers will have completed up to 30 hours supervised teaching with a similar amount of formal classroom observation. These requirements were expected for the 12 week alternative course although all student teachers exceeded minimum expectations.

* Regular seminars are arranged in the school involving the university tutor, visiting staff from the university, staff from the school and visiting student teacher groups from other schools in the program.

The result has been a teacher education program which is very different from the traditional preparation of teachers by placing greater demands on participating schools and student teachers. The impact on those involved has been quite complex and challenges some of the assumptions held about preservice education.

Impact on the cooperating school

The following comments from staff of the host schools indicates the types of benefits derived:

> "Because there was more time I had a greater commitment to working towards real improvement in her (the student teacher) teaching."
>
> " I learnt heaps from her (the student teacher). She revived my interest in ideas I had shelved for some time."
>
> "I could see my trainee develop confidence and she had time to reflect on the whole school rather than her two small teaching areas."
>
> "I have taught for many years and I have not experienced all the aspects of this school's life in the way the trainees have. I envy them that opportunity ....."
>
> "It (the school experience) was of benefit to the school because, rather than disrupting our program for a short three weeks, it has enhanced our program for a full term."
>
> "Due to the student teachers' enthusiasm and active participation in many aspects of the school's curriculum, they have proved to be a positive resource for the school."

There was evidence that the supervising teachers formed a different relationship with student teachers over the 10-12 week period when compared to the 3 week period. It could be described as a collegial relationship which included team teaching and curriculum materials development. Some staff from the host schools observed and incorporated assessment and teaching techniques into their repertoires and acknowledged the inservice value of their involvement.

The practicum as a learning experience

At the end of the second year the school-based program was reviewed with the aid of an external evaluator. The review included interviews with student teachers, school and university staff, and participation in the ongoing activities of the practicum. This report (Kushner 1988) raised a number of issues related to the function of the practicum in preservice teacher preparation. These issues will be set out as a series of questions.

Is the 10-12 week school experience too long?

Clearly the response to this question depends on what is happening during the school experience and what is expected from it. If the five propositions set out in Table 1 are regarded as desirable outcomes of the school experience one would be disappointed if student teachers merely conformed more effectively to the culture of the school. Coping in the classroom is an important objective but if the 12 week experience leads to teachers becoming more comfortable and set in their ways one would question the program.

A comparison of supervision comments (written and verbal) made at the beginning and end of the 12 week experience reveals a continued emphasis on classroom discipline and management issues. For one student teacher there is some frustration

> "She wants to find other ways of approaching teaching - she hates discipline - but all the advice she receives to help her improve her teaching is advice about classroom management and control, and encourages her back into the problem." (Kushner 1988, p23).

Is the extended school experience and the wider range of opportunities it provides really altering an almost total concern for classroom management skills which seems to be a characteristic of the 3 week teaching rounds?

Providing more time in the school will not alter the nature of the experience unless aspects other than classroom management are valued by all participants.

The issue is not a disagreement about the importance of classroom management skills for student teachers but about the most effective means of achieving this outcome. The extended school experience is based on an assumption that effective classroom management is more likely to be achieved by a student teacher who has gained an understanding of a school and its pupils and support and feedback from colleagues. One observation provides support for this latter assumption. As an observer and participant in lesson planning discussions it was interesting to note that pupil abilities and interests did not emerge in planning decisions before weeks 4 and 5. In the early weeks lesson planning was limited to the best ways of organising and presenting content. For student teachers lesson planning changed from a routine required for supervisors to a purposeful activity closely related to abilities, interests and backgrounds of known pupils. The difference in the nature of this lesson planning aspect of classroom management was quite marked. It seems that at least five weeks is needed before we can expect student teachers to gain a sufficient level of understanding of pupils to influence management approaches.

<u>Does an extended school experience confirm the perceived irrelevance of the tertiary institution in preservice preparation?</u>

The original interest by school personnel in providing an extended school experience can be partially traced to perceived deficits in the skills and abilities of first year teachers and associated shortcomings in the preservice program. The schools therefore felt that they could make a greater contribution to improving the quality of young teachers.

Turney et al (1985) describe widely held concerns about the value of the institutional based components of preservice programs

> "... the gap between the theoretical knowledge propounded in teacher education programmes and the experience of students in the practicum, and (between) the real world of work undertaken by teachers in today's school" (p.xii)

The authors identify two "gaps", firstly between course work and the practicum, secondly between the practicum and actual school experience. The extended school experience is designed to bridge the second gap and provide a more valid experience for considering the more theoretical aspects of the campus program.

General satisfaction with the extended school experience could be interpreted as confirming the view that the lectures and seminars at the tertiary institution are irrelevant. Student teacher development occurs (perhaps more effectively) when they are in a school setting rather than a tertiary institution for 12 weeks. Such a conclusion would mean a misunderstanding of the purposes of the experience and an underestimation of the link between the school experience and the campus program.

The link with the campus program is critical and the role of the university supervisor is important. Many of the issues and topics presented in lectures and seminars on campus are taken up (albeit in a different way) with the group in the school setting. Daily contact between the student teacher group and the university supervisor means that brief seminars can be organised in the school to discuss assessment, integrating disabled students, curriculum planning, etc. The seminars can be based on the school experience and arranged at appropriate times for the school group. The total 12 week experience becomes a basis for studying later topics and issues when the group returns to the campus for the second half

of their one year program. The extended school experience is not designed to replace the campus program but provide a sounder basis for considering the important educational ideas that are part of the preservice course. It is argued that an extended school experience may assist in bridging the gap between theoretical ideas and school practice. This can only happen if the experience is wider than a classroom experience and student teachers are assisted to reflect on their experience.

A final response to the question at the start of this section requires a careful consideration of the purposes of preservice education. In his review of the extended school experience Kushner (1988) poses a fundamental question

> "What vision of the professional teacher are you pursuing?" (p.44)

Two contrasting views are presented.

> "One is that a good teacher is one who has learned the craft (or the art) .... teaching is a problem that can be mastered. Once mastered it can be constantly refined. Teaching is practice, and what drives it is the acquiring of skills and the vision of success."
>
> The other view .... starts from the assumption that teaching can never be mastered. The problems are too great (we don't even know what learning is). But this not cause for dismay - what we can do is to arrive at better understandings .... Teaching is research ...." (p.44)

Kushner (1988) sees the extended teaching experience as an opportunity for student teachers to develop in each way.

> "There is an apprenticeship element to it - the chance to align yourself with chosen teachers; there is also the opportunity to learn how to research and reflect on teaching" (p.45)

Propositions 2, 3 and 5 (See Table 1) are more compatible with the second of the two views presented. The basic reason for the extended experience is to encourage reflection on practice and in this sense it should be a qualitatively different experience from the shorter teaching rounds. A constructivist view of student teacher learning requires that there be opportunities to reflect on an experience which allows some appreciation of the total work demands of a teacher. There is also a vision of teaching as a collaborative profession with colleagues important in the construction of meaning. The extended experience is not merely the replacement of the campus program with more time in a school setting to observe and model routine practices. The university is exploring the possibility of a practicum which provides new opportunities to present teaching as a reflective activity and in doing so reexamine its purposes and role in preservice preparation.

<u>How do we make sure student teachers continue to critically reflect in school environments which do not normally experience and may not value such activity?</u>

The question serves as a reminder of the need for cooperation between tertiary institution and school if the objectives of the extended experience are to be realized. The traditional practicum requires minimal interaction between school and tertiary institution - the school is to provide supervised teaching opportunities. The schools volunteering for the extended school experience were prepared to open a wider range of activities to student teacher observation and involvement. The extent to which schools are comfortable with "outsider" scrutiny is a matter of continued exploration and negotiation. Schools cannot easily open up their activities for examination. Secondary schools are organised into departments which tend to work independently and at times compete for resources. The school experience is based on the assumption that student teachers will be able to cross departmental boundaries to see teaching and learning in different subject areas and gain an understanding of school-wide

issues. It is clear that student teachers have to "earn" the opportunity to become such a learner about the school. Student teachers will have to be able to negotiate with a range of teachers and clearly communicate what they hope to gain from spending time outside their specialist areas. An interest in the school and a willingness to contribute are essential as the student teacher moves into a privileged position in the school. An earlier quote from one of the supervising teachers indicates a level of success in participating widely in school affairs

> "I have taught for many years and I have not experienced all the aspects of this school's life in the way the trainees have. I envy them that opportunity ....."

Perhaps the opportunities provided for student teachers may lead to greater opportunities for teachers to cross the boundaries which exist in a school. The three schools in the program have varied in the opportunities made available for students and members of each school staff has been surprised at the extent to which they have been prepared to participate in critical reflection on school practices and learn from student teacher presence in the school. Daily liaison between tertiary institution and school is crucial as the school experience requires continuous negotiation. In the early stages features of the school need to be interpreted with student teachers and advice provided to assist them to become part of the school. The school also requires interpretation of the respective roles of school and tertiary institution in preparing teachers. The extended school experience has been the opportunity for learning about and exploring the potential of the practicum.

The hope that student teachers will gain a wide experience of schools from a teacher perspective appears to have been realised. The extent to which student teachers have reflected on that experience is more problematic. There is evidence that some student teachers remain predominantly concerned with classroom

management issues (Kushner 1988). This is not unexpected when we consider the student teachers' stage of development and supervising teachers with a long history of management priorities when observing classes on a practicum. It may mean that we are expecting too much of student teachers to reflect on wider aspects of teaching within the first six months of their preparation. Perhaps we have underestimated the skills and guidance required to observe and consider such issues as

* The different teaching approaches employed by teachers in different subject areas.
* The ways in which different teachers manage the same class.
* The differing ways in which girls and boys are treated in different classes.
* The impact of assessment procedures on the way students perceive their school experience.

What has been achieved and what is possible? Attached is an extract of two student teachers discussing their 12 week school experience with an external evaluator. It allows the reader to form some opinion about the effect of the school experience and the development of these two students midway through their year of preparation for teaching.

Concluding Comments

Three sets of conclusions seem warranted at this early stage of a significant reform in a preservice program.

* The application of a set of propositions which incorporated constructivist ideas of learning about teaching meant that a more valid school experience had to form the basis of the preservice program. The 15,000 hours of formal schooling experience in the background of each student teacher is very powerful in shaping further learning about teaching. However it is not the experience of schooling from a teacher perspective and this experience can

be quite different. One of the student teachers reflected on first impressions of his host school,

> "I suppose I'd have to go back to when I came here for the first time - I went to a school very near here. It was a bad experience for me that very first day of observation - it brought back schools again - I was a very poor student at school, I hated school, left school at 15 and only came back to study as a mature age student. So it was - yeh, it was a bit disturbing. I really questioned whether I wanted to be a teacher then ...."

Later

> "Does the place still look forbidding then?"
>
> "No - that changed very quickly - when - I first came I still had that sort of student high school mentality - I was looking at it from a kid's point of view. That changes - I hope I never lose that perspective. But obviously you flick to a different mode - you are a teacher .... I felt really good coming in and the kids recognise you - 'Hi Mr Smith'. You feel good. People know you - they seem to like you - you feel part of it."

Some experience of the complex role of a teacher seems to be an important prerequisite for learning about teaching.

* There are schools willing to make greater contributions to teacher preparation. Whatever their reasons for increased involvement they express satisfaction with what has happened and surprise with some of the unintended outcomes.
* The practicum has been an accepted and significant component of teacher preparation. It has been largely a school responsibility with little

coordination between school and tertiary institution. The experience has been accepted as valuable but there has been little research on what happens and why.

> "... relatively few researchers have actually examined what takes place during the experience itself and how professional life is interpreted and acted upon as students participate in its ongoing affairs'. (Tabachnick and Zeichner, 1984, p24)

What began as a reform in a teacher education program has developed into a major research effort. There is a willingness to reconsider all aspects of the practicum - the role of the student teacher, tertiary institution and school. This close cooperation between school and tertiary institution is long overdue.

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An extract from a report on the school experience program (Kushner 1988).
(The interviewer is the author, Saville Kushner, with two student teachers, John and Jerry, reflecting on their 12 week school experience).

(Jerry) *"It's basically getting a feel for the work of the teacher....sports supervision - even to sitting in the staffroom - "*

"Is it a training experience - a part of teacher-training?"

"Very definitely, yes. Much more so than being at university and sitting at lectures which is a very unreal situation - especially in the first term before you've done any teaching. It's very hard to relate to what you're actually being taught in lectures...how that relates to the classroom situation...."

It's only when you are in an interactive situation with children that you understand the nature of, for example, behaviour problems. John agrees, though he also feels that what he learned in the first term was material he could apply to practice. In particular, he points to the "hands-on" experience he was given with educational technology - overhead projectors, duplicators, photocopiers. This he says he got more from his Methods course than from a special session he attended dealing with educational technology per se. It was an important element in building John's confidence for the moment when he found himself in a school situation having to function efficiently and naturally. "I didn't want to be the person who constantly wrecked the photocopier."

Jerry and John are sitting in the school library talking about their experience at the end of a school term throughout which they have been teaching at this school. They are very supportive of the Dip Ed programme and of the lengthier exposure to teaching practice than they would otherwise have had. It's a question, Jerry is explaining, of needing school practice to "really start the learning".

(Observer) *"Tell me about the process - how that operates. You presumably don't just do it and by doing it learn about it?"*

"Well, obviously, it relates to reflection on how you're teaching and looking at different angles."

"How do you reflect on your teaching.?"

"Well, I rely a lot on observing how the kids react to it. I learned very early on that they haven't got a very good concentration span - they don't like to sit there and write notes and listen to you for twenty or thirty or forty minutes. Those are the younger forms. You learn that - you sense it - they'll sometimes tell you that. So you try different things - "

John extends that by talking about sharing experiences with others on this Dip Ed programme - 'tales from the classroom', sort of thing, where you discover appropriate ways of showing videos, for example. But also, he says, by having access to other teachers and learning about your own teaching by observing theirs.

(Observer) *"What is teaching? What does it mean to be a teacher?"*

(Jerry) *"To me, it's got a lot to do with making kids inquisitive. If you can do that - capture their interest with whatever you're teaching and have them thinking about it - not so much even learning - just thinking "*

They both agree that the aim is to have children leave a classroom having thought about an issue and with a more "positive" attitude to enquiry and curiosity.

(Observer) *"Does the job of teaching look like that? What has the job, as you've seen it so far, emphasise?"*

(Jerry) *"I think the whole structure of school, obviously, emphasises grading - examinations, 'meal ticket' approach to education. You can't really get away from that - to an extent. Well, I think you can to an extent. There seems to be a lot more flexibility than I thought there was in teaching. There's a lot more opportunity for individual teachers to convey their own perceptions of knowledge."*

These two students are teaching Years 7 - 10 and they readily admit that examinations have not taken a strong hold on the curriculum at this stage. But the pursuit of curiosity is something Jerry puts into his teaching. He gives the example of magnetism. When he teaches that subject he might talk about bird migration and how birds are able to navigate - "getting them to think and query - and from there, I'd get into magnetism." He does that at the moment, but he remains unsure as to how long he will be able to sustain that as he moves into a full career.

(Observer) *"Are you encouraged to take risks?"*

(John) *"Yes, definitely. At university - I would say, yes, that's part of the Monash course. That has been - at least for our tute group - been very much emphasised - one area where we're encouraged to take risks in is classroom management."*

He recalls a time when their group was addressed by some first year teachers - reflecting about their early experiences. Many of the questions to them concerned classroom management. "I think we all went back after that lecture to the 'tute' and we said, those people have done exactly what we've been encouraged not to do. We're encouraged, in terms of management, to take risks and told 'you'll get it wrong, but that's part of the learning process - don't send the kid off to be part of someone else's problems. Have a go at dealing with it yourself."

This was the message he receives, too, from his supervisory teachers at the school.

"They say, we'll come up with something to teach this and if it works it works, and if it fails it's failed - but that's what you're here for, to take those risks." .....

(Break in text)

.....There is an argument that a whole term's exposure to teaching practice might induct a trainee into the 'survival culture' of schooling - just learning strategies from serving teachers for getting through a day and a week. Jerry feels that to be more of a danger with the conventional three-week teaching round, where the teaching activities are intensive and the student feels, 'all I've got to do is survive three weeks'. With this course eleven weeks spread ahead of him and he felt he could "pace" himself and disperse the pressure.

John is not so sure.

"Towards the end - well, from the middle - when I'd clocked up my mandatory number of hours I really felt - I haven't got enough ideas myself about what goes on in classrooms - the best way to learn that, in a way, is to be taught it by lectures and say, 'this is something you can do in the classroom' 'this is another way of doing it' - I was missing out on lectures which said that, and I slowly picked them up by seeing what's going on in another year 8 - what's going on over there.

Yes, I felt that I've enjoyed the times when I've gone back to Uni to pick up a few ideas of what I can do in the classroom, because the way I was teaching, I felt, was...you could keep teaching this way for the rest of your life...yes, I agree there is - I think we have a much clearer idea - better induction into the culture of teaching by doing this programme."

The conversation spills over into failure and how to cope with it. Jerry talks about an experience he had when a demonstration he was doing with a class failed to work - he used iodine on a leaf to expose starch, not knowing that this particular leaf was resistant to the treatment. That helped break a taboo for him - that the teacher should appear to be infallible - and helped boost his confidence. It helped him hold, in his terms, a more realistic view of what teaching is.

But John is not satisfied with that definition of failure.

"A practical that fails - or a (projector) bulb blows - you're not failing as a teacher because any joe can come in off the street and turn on a projector and the bulb fails."

He tries to recall a moment when he has felt that he has failed "as a teacher".

"What situations am I thinking of? I'm thinking of - when you have organised a class where you think, 'ah, the kids can do this and they're capable of such-and-such' - and it goes completely over the kids heads. They can't complete the task that you've set - what do you do with them the rest of the time - how do you get back control of that class when everything's gone wrong - " ....

(Break in text)

..........(John) *"Rather than developing a theory about learning or education - what we've been doing here is developing technique."*

Jerry thinks about that - *it's partly true, but it depends too much on the individual and how they respond to the opportunity.I come into teaching with a different angle to most student teachers. I have my own political outlooks and, I suppose, my own philosophical outlooks - they'll obviously determine the teacher I am and how I approach teaching..."*

He is a "strong ecologist" and is left-wing. He worked for ten years before deciding to train as a teacher - all of these make him and his approach to teaching individual. John goes along with that.

"I would say, if there was a philosophy or a theory about teaching and learning it's probably there to begin with - and it grows with you, but you can't express that until you have the technique - until you feel confident with a class, with managing a class...first of all you have to learn how to survive in classrooms."

(Observer) *"What's left for universities? You come to teaching with the theory - in school you learn the realities - you learn about success and failure in schools - universities are left with teaching you how to use the overhead projector?"*

They pause and laugh for a moment. John says, yes, technical management of equipment, learning how to use collage in a classroom (an insight he recently discovered) are useful things for a university to teach. The collage example was interesting for him - something he had felt to be a "mickey mouse activity"

"then going to Uni and being made to do that - what you would set kids - you realise that there's a lot of value in this type of activity. But, once again, it's not one of these things that you learn at Uni which develops your theory or philosophy about education - you've already got it before you start Dip Ed."

Jerry takes that further, unwilling to strip the university of its role in teaching theory and philosophy, but wanting students to have a grounding in educational practice before they confront that. He would have a Dip Ed starting with a brief introduction to the students before they went straight into schools to learn teaching. After that period they would return to university to theorise about it - relying heavily on group discussions, since it is this kind of forum which, in his experience of this course, encourages and enthuses students to talk and think about their teaching.